

AN ORATION

DELIVERED

July 4th, 1809,

IN THE NORTH DUTCH CHURCH,

BEFORE THE

WASHINGTON BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

OF

THE CITY OF NEW-YORK.

BY GULIAN C. VERPLANCK.

Though tamely crouch to Gallia's frown
Dull Holland's tardy train,
Their ravish'd toys though Romans mourn,
Though gallant Switzers vainly spurn
And foaming gnaw the chain;
Ne'er shall we bend the stubborn knee,
In Freedom's temple born,
Dress our pale cheek in timid awe,
Or tremble at a tyrant's law,
Or brook a master's scorn.

W. SCOTT

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*At a stated meeting of the WASHINGTON BENEVO-
LENT SOCIETY, held July 6th, 1809. Upon motion,
resolved, that the thanks of the society be returned to
Gulian C. Verplanck, Esq. for the oration delivered by
him on the 4th July, 1809—and that the Committee of
Arrangement be instructed to request a copy for publi-
cation.*

[Extract from the minutes.]

AN ORATION,

&c.

Fellow Citizens!

THIS is a day of no common joy. This day we celebrate a triple festival—the birth-day of our nation, the return of peace, the triumph of principle. We rejoice, that another year has found our country free, and great, and happy. We rejoice, that the storm of war which hath long hung black and threatening over our heads, is now fast breaking away. We rejoice, that the warning voice of the sages and patriots of our land has at length been heard—that our citizens have been awakened to a knowledge of their dangers, and our rulers to a sense of their duty. It is indeed a season of triumph. Each honest breast swells with the conscious dignity of independence. Each honest heart beats high with patriotic pride. And of such independence and such a land as ours who would not be proud? who so dull and cold as to view without exultation the rising glories of such a country? Our domain—of boundless extent, and of endless variety of soil, and clime, and produce—a land overflowing, bursting with redundant plenty. Our cities—gay with every elegance of polished life, and rich with the arts of peace and the profits of commerce. Our soil—tilled by a race

of freemen, lords of the soil, lords of themselves. **HERE** reigns the true equality of civilized man, the equality of equal liberty and equal laws. Here, the mind free and unshackled as the body, cramped and confined by no rude oppression, expands and dilates itself to the full stature and proportions of perfect manhood; and, as if labouring to repay the prodigal liberality of nature, essays its strength in every variety of ingenious speculation, of liberal art, and of useful invention—one while, like the Mohawk, winding along in gay luxuriance through smiling meadows and fields glad with harvest, dispensing joy, and health, and fertility; and now again, like the Hudson, rolling its steady course to the ocean, and bearing on its broad bosom the rich products of our industry, our arts, and our enterprise.

Of such a land, so rich in every gift of nature, so favoured of heaven, are we the happy sons. Let then no party rancour, no weak foreboding of future ill, repress the generous sympathies of our nature. Let us this day join in the general joy, and hail with honest pride the return of that day which rescued us from the oppression of foreign power, and gave us a claim to the glorious titles of republicans and of freemen.

Yet a doubt will sometimes flit athwart the mind whether these blessings are not too great to be very permanent. We look back upon antiquity, and see those republics from among which the light of science and the love of liberty first dawned upon the world, after a short course of glory, sink into the

dust, overwhelmed by foreign power, or mouldered away by some internal principle of corruption. We turn to the continent of modern Europe—those free states from which, when we first started into existence as a nation, we drew the models of our civil policy, are now no more to be found. Some of them, in those perilous *convulsions of change* which have shaken Europe to its centre, have been swept from existence ; and the rest may be seen crouching at the feet of Napoleon, the trembling vassals of military despotism. What reason have we to hope for exemption from the general doom ? What is there in our peculiar situation, or our national character, to save us from the fate of Athens and Sparta and Rome, of the free cities of Germany and Italy, and of the confederated republics of Switzerland and Holland ?

This is a question worthy of serious consideration. In the season of gloom and despondency through which we have passed, it might, perhaps, have been criminal even to have hazarded a doubt of the permanency of our republican institutions. But, in this moment of triumph, it may be useful to check our wild presumption, and calmly to examine upon what foundation our liberty rests ; what we have to hope, and what to fear.

On this subject I have often pondered in anxious meditation, and I know not whether my judgment was swayed by any weak partiality when I confidently concluded that our country, though perhaps destined to many a sad vicissitude of fortune, will yet

long continue to enjoy that individual liberty and national independence of which we now so proudly boast. The ground upon which I ventured to found this hope, was the very peculiar character of my countrymen. There is a certain cool moderation and shrewd good sense, which, in every state of education and manners, strongly mark the otherwise varied character of the people of these United States. This moderation will, I trust, ever preserve them from the frantic excesses of party ; and this discernment will enable them, after some experience, to estimate the true characters of their rulers, and to distinguish their real from their pretended friends.

Their ardent love of freedom may, doubtless, often expose them to be deluded by the arts and hollow professions of the crafty and the ambitious. For a time, power may be confided to impure hands. But that power can, I trust, never be extended far beyond the narrow bounds of constitutional authority. The moment that ambition oversteps those limits, the reign of deception is at an end, and the people will arise and vindicate their rights—not by riot, insurrection and violence, but in the temperate use of their legitimate power—legally, constitutionally, and peacefully.

For the correctness of this view of our political character, I appeal to every fact in our history—I appeal to every incident in that long and glorious struggle by which we achieved our independence. Even at the commencement of the revolution, when in the wild commotion of the moment every ardent

spirit in the nation was loosened from the spot where it had lain dormant, and rose buoyant with life and vigour to the surface ; when statesmen started from the desk and the counter, and generals from behind the plough and the work-bench—even in that maddening hour of tumult did temperate reason hold her seat. Our country, with cool discernment, from among the crowd of worthies who pressed forward to her service, selected *Washington* as the chief of her armies—*Washington*, the wise and the virtuous, but then, known only as the patient and the prudent. To this patience and prudence did she continue steadily to confide her dearest interests, unmoved by the whispers of calumny, undazzled by the glare of romantic valour and bold achievement. Often did the cause of independence appear to totter on the very verge of ruin. Often did it seem to almost every human eye that resistance was now no longer practicable. But the nation, animated by the great example of its illustrious chief, continued calmly and confidently to persevere. We triumphed.

But with the return of peace came not tranquillity. * A wild spirit of savage licentiousness had infected a portion of our fellow-citizens. After a short period of gloomy repose, it at length broke forth in bold and open insurrection. The laws were set at defiance, and the course of justice was opposed by

* See a very curious correspondence between Gen. Washington and Gen. Knox, Cols. Humphries and Lee, on the subject of the Massachusetts insurrection, in Marshall's life of Washington. Vol. 5. p. 114—120.

violence. The government was appalled, feeble, and powerless—but the people were true to themselves. The mad ferocity of the insurgents rapidly gave way before the disciplined valour of a patriotic militia ; and a rebellion which would have deluged any other country with blood, was quelled without the aid of a regular force, and almost without a battle.

Another and more important scene was now to succeed. The world was to be astonished with a new and more illustrious example of the practicability of popular self-government. The adoption of the federal constitution exhibited the wonderful phenomenon of the form of government of a great nation undergoing a complete and radical revolution without war, either foreign or domestic, without tumult and without commotion. Peacefully and calmly did the great work of regeneration proceed, until at length the fabric of regulated liberty arose in full and fair proportion, adorning and protecting the land.

At that time of feverish irritation against Great Britain, when we were yet smarting with our wounds and sore, it might naturally have been expected that we would have spurned away with contempt every institution of British origin. But such fanatic folly never disgraced that venerable body of sages to whom we had intrusted the formation of our constitution.

With the same temperate wisdom, which had hitherto guided our national councils ; they selected from the British constitution every feature of civil

liberty,* every bulwark which the republican spirit of the English nation had anciently erected to protect the subject against the power of executive oppression. Yet, at the same time, most steadily did they oppose every attempt to invest any, even the highest magistrate of the republic, with the tinsel trappings of royal or patrician splendor.

Such was the moderation, such the wisdom with which that union under which we have prospered for twenty years was framed and compacted together. That union is now “the mainpillar in the edifice of our real independence; the support of our tranquillity at home, our peace abroad; of our safety; of our prosperity; of that very liberty which we so highly prize.”†—God grant it may never be severed.

I pass over the events which immediately followed this important transaction; although many of them are highly interesting in themselves, and very strongly illustrate that peculiar view of the American character, to which your attention has been directed. We have seen with our own eyes, and our fathers have told us, with what careful diligence our country

* The right of trial by jury, the independence of the judiciary, and the privilege of habeas corpus, are here particularly alluded to. “Take away the writ of *habeas corpus*,” says Mr. Randolph, “and I would not give a pinch of snuff for your constitution; for without it every man might be imprisoned at pleasure. Government might possibly demand a forced loan, with which, if the citizen did not comply, he might be carried to jail. There is no free government where this wonderful contrivance, this best hope of man, this sheet anchor of freedom, the writ of *habeas corpus* is not found.”

† Washington’s farewell address.

continued to protect and foster the rights and happiness of her citizens at home, while she so proudly maintained their interests and dignity abroad, that

——— 'Twas pride and boast enough
In every clime; and travel where we might
That we were born her children.

But at length the wisdom of the nation slept. It would ill comport with the feelings of the present occasion, to call up to view that system of bold imposture and many-coloured lies, by which the friends of Washington were driven from public confidence; or to dwell upon the dexterity with which their antagonists seized and turned to their use the honest errors of some of our leaders and the obstinate imprudence of others, who have since, after sinking their own party, enlisted under the banners of their ancient political foes. But, let this pass—it is irksome to point out those spots which dim our country's glory. For a time, however, trick and stratagem were successful. So completely were the people drugged with the opiates of flattery and fair profession, that they lay in stupid lethargy, and saw their navy dismantled, and their commerce left to the mercy of every petty pirate. They saw, without indignation, the temples of justice broken open, and the judiciary, the firmest bulwark of their liberties, thrown down and trampled under foot. Unmoved, they beheld a system of executive corruption and unconstitutional influence sprouting forth from the head of the administration, spreading through every department of the state, and enveloping the repre-

sentative majesty of our nation in its broad and poisonous shade. Even the suspicion of foreign influence in the administration could not rouse them to examine their danger. The clouds of war blackened the horizon, and we seemed about to band ourselves with the vassal powers of Napoleon, and lend our conscript youth to fight the battles of the despot. It was an awful moment. Those to whom we had hitherto been used to look for counsel and for succour, were no more. Hamilton, Elsworth, Ames, like *sere and yellow leaves*, falling around us, had given awful portent of that gloomy season which was about to lower upon their country. All around us was dark and silent. All abroad was threatening and tempestuous. As we stood gazing around in stupid apathy, we were suddenly aroused by a voice which bade us BEWARE—which told us, there was imbecility in our councils, perhaps corruption in our cabinet. It was a voice to which we had heretofore listened with confidence. It was the voice of those to whose valour we owe our liberties, to whose wisdom, our laws—of men venerable for public service and for private worth.

We started as if from a dream. Thousands of gallant spirits pressed forward at once, from every side to the rescue of their country. Personal animosities died away. Party difference was forgotten. We saw with astonishment, men whom we had hitherto been accustomed to respect rather for the integrity of their hearts, than for the vigour of their understanding, now standing forth in the foremost ranks

of the defenders of the constitution. We saw them as danger thickened round, rising with the occasion, gathering strength from the exigency of the moment, and defending their holy cause with talents which would not have dishonoured the best days of English eloquence, and with courage, that would not have shrunk back from the walls of Quebec or the heights of Bunker's Hill.

As the electric spark caught from man to man, the popular voice gradually swelled to such a peal of remonstrance, that the faction which was hurrying us to ruin stood appalled. Their trembling chief started from his chair of state, and hurried from the public eye. On the very verge of the precipice we stopt. The country was saved.

Fellow citizens—to whom do we owe this? to whom do we owe it, that we this day meet in freedom and in peace. Not to our Pickering's, our Bayards, and our Lloyds. No, not to them,—though they have done much, though they have deserved well. No—but to the people themselves—the people who had the discernment to distinguish their friends from their flatterers, and the magnanimity to sacrifice the pride of opinion to the public good.

To the people of this land, then, experience has shown that the protection of their own rights may be safely confided.* But we have yet another ground

* In addition to the argument, here used, for the probable duration of our republican form of government, others less suited, indeed, for the purposes of declamation, but of equal weight, may be drawn from some peculiar circumstances in our situation, and the structure of our constitution. 1st. Our country presents a boundless field to active enterprise ; and honest exertion can, here,

of hope—a higher, holier hope. Without debasing ourselves in abject superstition, or indulging any bold presumption, may we not, in the manly spirit of rational piety, dare to trust that our liberties are in a peculiar manner under the protection of that providence which has guided us in safety through so many scenes of difficulty and danger? The experience of history will show us that as some states have been selected by heaven as the depositaries of truth and knowledge, so others have been marked by spe-

rarely fail of success. As long as this state of things continues, we have little to fear from the irregular ambition of those aspiring spirits whose vigorous struggles for the attainment of wealth and power so often throw into commotion those old and populous states, where all the sources of riches are under the control of a few overgrown capitalists; while the only avenues to *public* distinction, are the claims of hereditary dignity, or of seniority and slow ascent through the routine of public service. 2nd. Our division into state governments.—The sovereignties of the states comprise so much of that part of legislation which comes most nearly home to the feelings and interests of the individual, that those passions, which if felt at once throughout the nation, and directed to a single point, might endanger the safety of the whole, are now employed on smaller objects, and on a smaller scale. The flame of local faction may for a time blaze with vehemence, but it is pent up in the narrow limits of the state where it originates; its ravages are slight, and the reparation easy. 3rd. The facility with which party rage finds an easy and harmless vent.—The immense number of legislative and corporate elective bodies in the United States, form a vast system of checks and balances, perhaps, more efficient than those regularly provided by the constitution; while the consequent frequency of elections, which to a mere speculative politician might seem of the most dangerous tendency, is, really, found productive of very salutary effects. For a week or two previous to every election, all is noise and tumult—but beyond this we have little to dread. All that is most dangerous in the excess of party feeling in the people is refined away by filtration through the medium of their representatives—the victorious party forget their anger and personal animosities in the joy of triumph, and the vanquished solace their mortification with boasts of what they can do at the next election; or are, perhaps, consoled for the loss of their president or governor by succeeding in their members of assembly, or getting a majority in some city corporation.

These are points worthy of a more serious investigation. In the narrow compass of a note they can scarcely be presented distinctly to view.

cial favour as the chosen channels through which civil and religious liberty might be conveyed to posterity. Thus by the arm of the Almighty, and not by their own strength, were the petty republics of Greece supported against the gigantic power of the Persian empire. Thus, in later times, were Switzerland and Holland long upheld against the arts and arms of Spain, and Austria, and France. Our own country now seems to be chosen as the sanctuary in which the models of republican institutions may be preserved and perfected, until the whole land shall be filled with a race of freemen, from the western to the eastern ocean, from Labrador to Mexico. Yet this is, perhaps, wild and presumptuous speculation, and I dare not urge it farther.

Let us recollect, too, that the Almighty in the various operations both of the natural and moral world often condescends to act through the medium of human agents ; that though *he watereth the furrows of the earth, and sendeth rain into the little vallies thereof, and maketh it soft with the drops of rain*, yet he requires the toil and the skill of the husbandman ere *the vallies stand thick with corn*.

Thus animated by pious hope, thus confident in the integrity of our fellow-citizens, we may boldly persevere in every honourable exertion for the support of what *we* deem sound principle. I know there are among us some, whose gentler natures shrink back from the rude contests of civil discord. Upon such men I would urge the consideration, whether in a government like ours, whose vital prin-

ciple is the mutual dependence of all on each, they are not bound as well by duty as by interest to sacrifice their convenience, and even sometimes their feelings to the general welfare. Let them recollect that there is a considerable portion of the community of very limited information, although of sound judgments and honest hearts. If these men are not induced by the force of personal influence and individual exertion to *strengthen the arms of honest men*, they may, perhaps, be deluded to become the tools of the crafty and the turbulent. Finally, I would remind them that in their hands are intrusted the hopes and fortunes of their children and their children's children ; and, in the name of their country, I admonish them that they slumber not over the sacred deposit. In the language of ancient patriotism, I charge them, that they see well to it that the republic suffer no wrong.* Although complete success do not at once crown their efforts, let them not despond. We now know that the struggles even of a minority may oftentimes procrastinate, delay, and at length avert the evil hour. Still let us not rest satisfied with partial success. The present is a time which demands the most active vigilance. From the character of our present chief magistrate, we have much to hope, and much to fear. We behold in him, the friend of our *Hamilton*—the supporter of the calumniators of *Washington*—the advocate of temperate liberty—the patron of the admirers of French li-

* Caveant ne quid detrimenti respublica capiat. LXX

centiousness. We have seen him foremost among the early assertors of our national independence, and yet, content for a time, to submit in silence, to those plans of ruin that had almost brought us to the feet of Napoleon.

Still, perhaps, his principles may be sound, though ambition may have led his steps astray. The infection of French policy which has floated over our land, like the pestilent vapour of the Arabian deserts, blasting and corroding all that it touched, may, perhaps, have passed over *his* senses like a gentle gale. He has begun well—let us hope, then, for the best. But he has much to do. Let him continue in a course of strict impartiality towards foreign nations. Let him brush away with no gentle hand those vermin that have swarmed around the capitol and sucked the life-blood of the nation—every intriguing sycophant, every tool of power. Let him spurn from him that violator of our constitutional liberties, that public plunderer who has so long polluted and disgraced the American army—let him plant his foot upon that bloated reptile, and crush out at once his venom and his froth. This done, let him persevere in the policy of *Washington*. Virtue will hail her returning son, and the gratitude of his countrymen will shed around his character such a blaze of glory, that each foul blot and stain of his earlier life will be forever hidden from our dazzled eyes.

Friends and Brothers of the Washington Society,

Among the many impressive lessons of political wisdom which may be drawn from the history of republican Rome, one of the most remarkable may be found in the conduct of their senate towards an unfortunate general, whose rash imprudence had almost caused the ruin of the state. When the senate was assembled to hear the disastrous tale of Cannæ, they learnt that through the misconduct of their chief, a chosen army, the last hope of the nation, had been utterly discomfited, and the flower of the Roman youth left dead upon the field: but when they were told that the consul, even in that hour of overwhelming shame and confusion, had not forgotten that he was the first magistrate of a great people—that he was rallying the scattered remnants of his routed legions, and summoning to his aid whatever of resource or succour the dignity of the Roman name, or the authority of his own high station, could yet command, every spark of resentment died away, and a vote was solemnly passed, that the consul had deserved the thanks of his country, for not having despaired of the republic. That praise, fellow-citizens, is yours. At a time when general and individual calamity pressed heavily upon all classes, when others stood in cold and stupid despondency, you did not despair of the republic.

In the darkest period of that gloom, ere yet the day spring had dawned in the east, you arose, to the protection of your country and the relief of your

fellow-citizens. You collected into one channel each little rill of charity, which had hitherto wandered as chance or caprice might guide, and bade them flow in one steady stream of judicious bounty. You reared the standard of principle and called upon every honest man to rally around it. Excluding with scrupulous care the bigoted monarchist, and the rancorous jacobin, you united into one body all who honoured the constitution, all who venerated the memory of Washington. His life you selected as the great example of your conduct—his last solemn charge to his countrymen as the text book of your policy. The success, which has already crowned your efforts for the diffusion of truth and the relief of distress, is such as should excite you to yet higher exertion. Proceed then as you have begun. Though calumny assail, though difficulties arise, still persevere. Hand in hand—friends, fathers, fellow-countrymen—hand in hand boldly persevere. PERSEVERE and you proceed triumphantly. Triumphant in the consciousness of virtuous principle, triumphant in the certainty of ultimate success—fully assured, that whatever dangers may seem to impend, if the nation be but sound at heart there is nothing to fear. The dream of delusion will soon flit away. The people will arise in the majesty of their might, and SAVE THEMSELVES.